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ABSTRACT

Problems in the preparation of a school play for opening night are discussed in this paper for the benefit of directors who may not have had any previous experience in play production. The questions of what the director does, when he does it, and why he does it are all explored in sections on choosing a play, establishing command, casting, the rehearsal schedule, technical solutions, publicity, performances, finances, and evaluation. An appendix provides a sample rehearsal schedule. (JM)

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PLAY PRODUCTION FOR INEXPERIENCED DIRECTORS:

A BLOW BY BLOW ACCOUNT

Jerry L. Long

On any given night throughout America hundreds of plays are produced by every type of theatrical group imaginable. Whether the producing organization be educational, religious, civic, or professional, common problems are faced in arriving at that time known as "opening night". The problems cited and the solutions proposed herein, therefore, can be applicable to almost any group which undertakes the presentation of a play. Because of extensive experience in educational theatre, this writer chooses to discuss the various aspects of play production from that viewpoint.

The assumption is that you have been chosen to direct the play this year and that you may not posses expertise in play production. Your teaching discipline may range from English to physical education and the procedures applied by directors are foreign to you. What do you do? When do you do it? Why do you do it?

Choosing a Play

Obviously, the first step is to choose a play. There are two methods which enjoy some widespread application. The committee method of play choice has several disadvantages. If a committee chooses the play, you may be saddled with a piece of literature which you simply do not understand nor appreciate. Many schools utilize this mode. From the administration's point of view, this method of choosing a play is certainly democratic, and, therefore, produces the least amount of objection. From your point of view,

CS 500 902

it may be disastrous. Who is responsible for the production, you or the committee? If you are the responsible party, then the choice of play logically should be yours. Democracy will work well in many endeavors. In theatre, however, someone is responsible; therefore, someone must be in charge. If that someone is you, then leaving the choice of your prime vehicle to other people who certainly have no responsibility for the finished product is irrational.

This decision does not negate, of course, the obvious. If you are inexperienced, you would be irrational to not seek help. One method of doing this is to interview your colleagues who have read plays. One of your problems is to formulate a list of plays to read and from which to choose. Many inexperienced directors find that listing four or five play titles that they find acceptable and seeking the guidance of a committee in the final selection solves the "democracy" element many schools seem to prefer.

But how do you decide which play will work for your situation? After all, the choice of the play could contribute as much as 50% to the success of the production. After compiling a list and reading the plays, you might well consider several criteria. First, what and how many students are available for the company. Ben Hur is a great story and will pack your house, but do you have the students to accomplish the tasks inherent in a production of a Ben Hur? Remember that the cast is only part of the show. Who will run the lights, build the sets, make the costumes, and all of those other many theatrical elements so necessary to a successful production? If four people are available, you obviously do a play four people can handle.

Second is the consideration of the educational objectives. If the production of a play is an educational experience, the choice of the play

should fit the prerequisite of being accepted as literature. To start with garbage is to end with, at best, a compost heap. Good literature will facilitate an artistic product, hence, an educational product. Do not cheat those who participate nor those who patronize.

Third is the realization of the community's role in the production. Be careful! If your community is like many others, it does not approve of nor appreciate suggestive pieces. Never mind how many "R" and "X" rated films are shown to full houses. The actors here are their children and they will not stand for it. At the same time, they want to be entertained. That entertainment does not, as many seem to think, limit itself to laughter. Aristotle told us quite a few years ago that the purgation of an emotion was what audiences desired. That includes, laughing, cheering, and crying. If it didn't, soap operas and football games would have disappeared long ago. A good play choice from the community's point of view, then, will include the various stimuli to various emotions.

A word of advice here, however; do not disregard a play because of a few expletives or an unsavory scene. Most publishers will allow judicious editing so long as you do not adulterate the story line. A Tennessee Williams or an Edward Albee play can be edited for community considerations. Since the publishers have been mentioned here, it should be stated as emphatically as possible that many plays are not in the public domain. To produce them without permission and without royalty payment is unethical and illegal. It is just as much a theft as shoplifting. Do not do it or even think about doing it. If you get caught, the results could be painful.

Establishing Command

So now you have chosen a play; what is next? If play choice by a committee is inadvisable, play direction by a committee is ridiculous. Why?

Too many commanders causes only confusion in the battle lines. You are in charge. Other staff members can and should be encouraged to participate if they desire, but only under your guidance and your confirmation. If this is not the policy and the policy is unchangeable, get out, leave, resign. It just will not work.

Casting

Now that you are responsible for the finished product, what is next? Obviously you need a cast. How do you get them? Contact as many people as possible through posters and oral announcements. Schedule auditions at a time which will facilitate the largest turnout. More than one tryout session is usually best. It gives you and the actors a chance to adjust to each other and to the script.

Have those who are auditioning read from the script as assigned by you during the first session. Let them borrow the scripts overnight and read a selection of their own choosing during the second session. This method seems to allow each actor the opportunity to display his talents best which is advantageous to you, the actor, and the production.

Make no commitments about parts, have open auditions, be fair in considerations, and give all who appear an equal opportunity to display their talents. To begin a project which requires the cooperation of all by showing some clandestine favortism is not conducive to the success of a group effort.

Choose the actors for the parts carefully. If the play choice is 50% of the production, the right cast can contribute another 30% to a successful achievement. The obvious characteristics you will evaluate are the actors ability to express themselves verbally and physically. They also need to be considered for compatibility in relation to other cast members. A 5'6" Starbuck playing opposite a 5'8" Lizzie in Richard Nash's The Rainmaker

could drastically alter the playwrights intentions.

A word of caution here is in order. Trust your playwright. The conception of plot, thought, character, and dialogue was his. You create through presentation of these elements, but do not distort them, no matter how funny or sensational! The less obvious characteristics are responsibility and freedom in schedule of the actors. An actor who cannot or will not come to rehearsal is a definite detriment to the group effort.

Needless to say the casting should be your choice. Here again a committee decision reduces the probability of success. It is probably best to announce your cast as soon as possible following the auditions. Some directors prefer to announce their choices immediately after auditions, others wish to think about it for a short period of time and then post the selections. Whichever the case, be sure to show your appreciation to all who were involved and explain generally the criteria you used for selection. After all, at a later time you may want to cast them in a part. Let them know you appreciate them and their talents.

Rehearsal Schedule

Now that you have a cast, what do you do with them? The rehearsal schedule is an extremely important tool in producing a play. The actors will want to know when they need to be there and what part of the play will be worked on while they are there. It is suggested that the director meet with the cast as soon as possible after auditions to determine a convenient time for the rehearsals. Sometimes immediately after the regular school day is best; other times can also be considered. How many people are available on weekends, at night, during the school day?

Generally speaking a rehearsal period exceeding four hours is wasted time. You and your people are tired and the cooperative effort will suffer. Three hours is best for all concerned. Rehearsals into the early hours are unnecessary and cause more problems than solutions; avoid them except in extreme cases. In educational theatre most plays can be well rehearsed in six weeks of once a day (five days a week) sessions. To drag out the rehearsal period longer causes the advent of boredom; to shorten it appreciably disallows the maturation period young actors need to develop characters, movement, and unity of effort.

Most plays are three acts in length; most three act plays have a longer first act than second and a longer second act than third. It is, therefore, recommended that more rehearsal sessions be alloted for the first act than the second and for the second act than the third. A typical rehearsal schedule is attached.

Read through the entire play the first rehearsal. Make sure everyone knows what acts and scenes he is in, and see that he marks his lines. Give any editing of that script at this first session. The first item of business for each act as it is rehearsed is to give the basic movements to the actors. This is known as "blocking." Often the movements listed in most scripts will work for your production, if your floor plan for the set is the same or similar to the one printed in the back of the script. If you choose a different floor plan, the movements will be altered and you will need to provide them for the actors.

Above all do not tell an actor, "just move where you want to." To do so is to open a door with little chance of closing it; in addition, it inspires little confidence from him of your organizational abilities.

Some director's prefer to use the suggested set, others would much rather create their own environment. What works best for you should determine your choice. If completely inexperienced you might do well to stick with the suggested set until you gain expertise in motivation of movement and stage picturization.

The rehearsal schedule should be more than a listing of what is done at rehearsal. It should be a plan by which all of the elements of production are coordinated into a finished product. It should, therefore, include deadlines for line memorization, completion of technical aspects (lighting, sets, costumes, etc.), and preparation of publicity and house considerations. A general guide for priority is that you should accomplish the most difficult tasks first. If costuming is extensive, then its deadline should come before the next biggest problem area. Save the last two or three days for finishing touches on the technical areas of the problem. The old adage about the curtain opening before the paint has dried on the set is for the non-serious, non-thinking, non-profesional director. Do not be one!

During the rehearsal sessions the director should do his best to make certain all members of the cast are gainfully employed toward the play. Arrange rehearsing scenes so the actor who enters at page one, exits on page 3 and does not enter again until page 27 is not just sitting wasting his time.

Among other things, he could rehearse both scenes consecutively and then leave. He could also be learning lines, working on costumes, scenery, sound, or whatever needs doing. As the rehearsal schedule progresses, the continuity of an act needs to be stressed, however, and often waiting to come back on is all the actor can do. A general guide is try to use the

cast's time efficiently. They will appreciate it and the production will profit from it.

Technical Solutions

There are several different methods of achieving the work required to meet the technical needs of a production. Some schools and individuals like to rely on colleagues in various academic departments to accomplish the tasks. Consequently, the wood working class builds the scenery, the art department paints the sets, and the homemakers build the costumes. Cosmetology does the hair stying and make-up, electronics does the lighting and sound, some school organization assumes the concessions, and it is all pulled into a coherent unit in the end. This method has advantages in that it involves a large number of people in the effort. It becomes a school project rather than involving only one group of people. The obvious disadvantage rests in co-ordinating these results into a single unit. Painting as done by the art department is not the same as painting scenery. The wood-workers do not construct scenery to meet the criteria of a good set piece or flat. Those drama programs which last year in and year on and year out do so because they are fun and educationally sound. A drama group should be self-contained unit. Reliance upon another group for any element other than budget or audience will result in a dependence which can be stifling in its restrictions. For the totally inexperienced director, the former method may be necessary, but he should definitely work toward the latter.

Publicity

Publicity, for some reason, is the aspect of production most often neglected. It, by the way, is one of the most important, ranking on a par

with the script and with choosing the cast. There is a dreadful recurring nightmare that many experienced directors have; the curtain opens and there is no one in the house. To put your company through six weeks of planning and anxiety on your part, and to sell 100 tickets is a tragedy. Please notice the word is "sell". Do not give your tickets away. Build a product that is worth the price of the ticket, and through publicity let the people know. Poster's reproduced through commercial outlets are available. If you find the cost prohibitive, silk screening is a possibility which is fairly reasonable in financial outlay. Of course the home made poster done with several colored felt markers method is available to anyone with the time and who can print. In any case get the posters in the community. Most merchants are glad to display them. Do not expect them to provide the tape for adhering them though. Have your people equipped.

Letters to neighboring schools often do well in attracting groups to see the production. A discount on student tickets and a complimentary ticket for the sponsor often works wonders. Be sure to reciprocate, however, when they do a show.

The building of a mailing list of patrons is an often overlooked method of publicity which can produce good results. If you do not currently have one, a membership list from local civic organizations and professional groups is a good source.

Do not forget the radio and television stations of your locale. All are required by F.C.C. regulations to allow time for public service announcements and your project qualifies. The best method is to write a compact but informative spot announcement and forward it to their program director.

Local newspapers, especially in small towns, are usually starving for copy. A well written publicity story utilizing lots of names of company

members usually stands a good chance of receiving a high priority status. Be sure you forward it in plenty of time to meet their deadline for publication.

Other avenues do exist, some tried, often not. One school in a small town anticipating a small ticket sales divided the phone book among the company members. Each was given a prepared sales pitch and asked to call all individuals listed on their assigned pages. That show played to four full-houses. People are dying to go places if they are informed.

Performances

So the rehearsels are completed the tickets sold and soon the audience will arrive. What do you do now? You continue to work.

While the performers are applying make-up with assistance and the crews are making checks of lights, props, set, and costumes, the house crew has set up a ticket booth with plenty of change for door sales. The concessions crew has set up the soft drink and coffee booths. The ticket takers are ready, and the ushers, programs in hand, are ready to escort the patrons to their seats. You are overseeing all this activity.

A caution is in order at this point. Importance of patrons has already been pointed out. Be sure that your patrons feel welcome. A program for every person is a necessity. Unless your house is reserved, which is highly unlikely in most cases, make sure ushers seat the people in the area they desire, assuming there are empty seats in that area. The public is indispensable. Make them feel wanted and chances that they will return are enhanced. Treat them discourteously and the best production possible will not sweeten the sour taste.

Intermissions are necessary. One high school principal once informed a director that intermissions only allowed time for people to get into trouble. When informed that a visit to the restroom was often a necessity he replied that they could go during the show. This individual obviously had no understanding nor appreciation of theatre as an educational art. Fifteen to twenty minutes is a sufficient time for necessities and allows time for refreshments. Your audience will appreciate it.

Finances

Probably more teachers have been dismissed for mishandling school funds than for any other reason. If possible let someone else oversee the fiscal aspects of the production. You have too much to do as it is without counting money. If you are saddled with this job also, however, several general guidelines will help.

First have tickets printed and numbered consecutively. Print only the number of tickets for which you have seats; not one more. Second, a single price for every seat simplifies matters and a round figure such as $1.00 or $2.00 eases the "making change" problem. Third, do not spread the tickets all over town to be sold. A central handling agency works best. If you have half your house issued to student salesmen, you have no idea of the number of tickets sold for any particular performance. Fourth, print each performance's tickets in a different color for easy identification reasons. Fifth, have some responsible person available to take telephone reservations during the daytime hours. Sixth, establish a policy that an expired ticket is invalid for a subsequent performance. Be sure that each night's tickets, sold and unsold, are accounted for before the next performance. Seventh, keep a record of all complimentary tickets and mark

the ticket "comp" across the face. These tickets have no refundability and should be identifiable from those which have been bought. Eighth, deposit all revenue as soon as possible keeping only a sufficient amount to make change. Ninth, keep ticket sales revenue seperate from concession revenue. Tenth, file a financial report with the administration of your school, keeping a copy for your files. Eleventh and last, destroy all out of date tickets.

At the other end of the fiscal problem lies the budgeting of the production. Even experienced directors seem to know little of the amount of funds needed to produce a play. It takes money. Quite often the income does not equal the output.

It should be stated here that no educational project in a school should be required to "pay for itself". The chemistry department is budgeted from taxation; why shouldn't the drama program enjoy the same privilege?

In any case, budget sources are mandatory. The following list of items all contribute to the cost of a production. They should be budgeted in advance to assume enough operating funds:

Scripts
Royalty
Lumber
Nails and screws
Muslin
Glue
Hinges
Colored media for lights
Make-up
Security & Custodial Services
Concessions
Material for costumes
Thread
Pins & needles
Sound tapes
Various hand props
Paint
Light bulbs
Electrical wire
Printing of Programs and tickets

The price you pay for these items varies depending on local economy. Needless to say that it is not "cheap". A contigency fund is highly desirable to cover unexpected costs.

If these ~~costs~~ items are to be bought on a requistition/purchase order, sufficient time is required for the inevitable delay in the purchase order procedure with small items such as hand props being purchased through petty cash funds. In any case a receipt for each purchase is an absolute necessity. Keep your money straight.

Evaluation

The production is over, the money deposited, and the financial report submitted. What is there left to do. If play production is a sound educational experience, evaluation is in order. Did your plans reach fruition? Was the planning sound? Was the experience beneficial? Did each member of the company profit from the production? How did the student body react? Did the teachers find it rewarding? What was the administration's reaction? Play production is an experiment. It involves planning, execution, and evaluation. The triumvirate is necessary and valuable if implemented.

It is hoped that the suggestions included in the foregoing have helped you to understand what lies in waiting. Is it worth all the trouble, time, pain, joy? Yes, definitely for some, possibly for others. In any case, you have been chosen to direct the play. You can approach it haphazardly or with some system in mind. The aspects discussed earlier are not the only methods, and not necessarily the best for you and your situation. They have worked for many and could work for you. Use your head! Have fun! Good luck! Break a leg!

APPENDIX

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

MONTH	DAY	AGENDA	TIME	CREW
	M	Readings	2-?	
	T	Readings	2-?	
	W	Read Through	4-7	
	T	Block Act 1	4-7	
	F	Block & Run 1	4-7	
	M	Run 1	4-7	
	T	Block & Run 2	4-7	
	W	Block & Run 2	4-7	
	T	Run 2	4-7	Publicity Letters
	F	Run 1	4-7	
	M	Run 1 & 2	4-7	
	T	Run 1 & 2	4-7	
	W	Run 1 & 2	4-7	
	T	Run 1	4-7	
	F	Run 1 (Lines, Act 1)	4-7	
	M	Block Act 3	4-7	
	T	Run 2 & 3	4-7	Posters distributed
	W	Run 2 & 3	4-7	
	T	Run through (Lines 2)	4-7	Props due
	F	" "	4-7	Furniture due
	M	Run through (Lines 3)	4-7	Make-up sketches due
	T	" "	4-7	Tickets ready
	W	" "	4-7	Costumes ready
	T	" "	4-7	Lights ready
	F	" "	4-?	Set completed
	Sat	Full dress	9-12	Make-up
			1-5	Complete
	Sun	Run through	2-?	Complete except make-up
	M	Full dress	6-?	Complete House crew meets at 2:00 PM
	T	Performance	6:00	Cast Call
	W	Performance	6:30	Crew Call
	T	Performance		
	F	Performance		

Adherence to this rehearsal schedule will help to insure a quality production. Rehearsals begin on time and will end on time. Tardiness or absence cannot be tolerated. If an emergency arises, see or call director. Do not send word by someone else; it is just wasted time and effort for all involved. Crew members will be assigned and will be told by the crew heads when their presence is needed. Do your part and the production will happen as it is planned. You fail and the group effort will suffer. Rehearsals are always open and your attendance to observe is encouraged.